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LAUNCHES They're PR, but also a big part of local party scene

CONTINUED FROM E1

There are many more very young people here than at most lancements – fresh-faced kids acting grown-up, the boys in awkward-looking suits or more relaxed hip-hop jerseys, the girls in variations on the tank top and tight jeans, many of them barely old enough to sip the beer and wine offered, trying to appear demure. There are many brothers and sisters and cousins from Veille's family, with similar wide perfect lips and Renaissance noses, darting about excitedly. Older family members and industry types hover near the bar within view of the high-def screen showing Veille's video, filmed in Paris on trains & boats & planes and in front of the Arc de Triomphe.

Nouvelle génération or not, one thing remains the same: the obligatory long list of thanks to people who made the album possible, from family to industry, with the star moment covered by the paparazzi. As Veille's lips glisten in the gauzy lighting, she is the cover girl next door chez nous (at home on 7 Jours and Voir alike). She is as thoughtful and polished as those stones, as if she had just graduated from a school that turns out product for the Quebec star-system.

The biggest difference between launches in English Canada and here, says Marie-Ève Boisvert, chief publicist for entertainment promoters Équipe Spectra (and its festivals, including the jazz fest) is "the proximity between the artist and the public – we're very close to them, and I include myself among the public even though I'm in the business. You can talk to them directly, you're never shy, you feel like they're at the same level as you. I've met artists in different places and there was a big distance between them (and the public).

"We feel closer to the artists so we can talk about them more easily to journalists. There is not much separation between their image as a star and their day-to-day life." When a local vedette could be your neighbour buying milk, booze and les journaux at the corner dépanneur, things get a little more *intime* than in Hollywood or Paris. In her job at Spectra, Boisvert sees the same artists "over and over again. And I realize that in the Quebec star system, the relationships are *plus authentiques*."

Just about to turn 30, Boisvert broke into the PR business in the late '90s at the Montreal International Jazz Festival. She glides between interview requests a seemingly unperturbed model of efficiency. And yet fear lurks behind every lancement.

"I'll be honest with you, each and every time the biggest fear is not having anyone show up. We realize that we're just one tributary of the news – and you never know what's going to happen that morning. If there's something that shakes the world, you don't get attention (as with the blizzard that wiped out Day One festivities at the Old Port for the Montreal High Lights Festival).

"We work so hard to put everything together, that on the morning of the event you're left just keeping your fingers crossed."

Hey, it's still a city of bread and circuses and chauvinism: last year Spin magazine, this year an all-Montreal issue of Gourmet ("North America's Most European City!"). Every accolade from abroad (Denys Arcand's Oscar, Les Triplettes de Belleville, Céline Dion, Cirque du Soleil, even Les Cowboys Fringants breaking through in France) is eagerly lapped up by the locals – plebs and intellos alike – as confirmation that their little showbiz enterprise works from the bottom up.

DAVE SIDAWAY THE GAZETTE
Marie-Ève Boisvert, an Équipe Spectra publicist: after all the work to prepare for a launch, "on the morning of the event you're left just keeping your fingers crossed."

Affordable Montreal, as Gourmet put it. Tout le monde seems connected on some tribal level to the dozens, hundreds, thousands of local acts. Lancements are not only a franco-American imitation of Hollywood but also part of local street action. That's where things get incestuous in Montreal. Consider the case of Evelyne Morin-Uhl. At 23 she is not only a local star of sorts, as a member of Les Moquettes Coquettes, that saucy gang of five chick music fans who interview local stars live at Le Cabaret or La Tulipe for CHOC.FM, the Internet radio station of l'Université du Québec à Montréal. She's also a research assistant for Mange ta Ville, a TV show hosted for ARTv by her fan and friend Catherine Pogonat, an on-the-go 28-year-old of Romanian-French parentage who also does a weekend radio show on Espace Musique.

Mange ta Ville makes the rounds of openings and events, part of the wiry Pogonat's indefatigable mission to scour Montreal street life. The two of them were at the launch (crammed into Le Sergent Recruteur bar on St. Laurent Blvd.) for La Nuit Blanche, the all-night revel climaxing the High Lights Festival, a night where they themselves would be a part of the action, live on TV.

"I get invited to all the events as a researcher," says Morin-Uhl. "It's my double life. It allows me to discover lots of shows, and to catch up on news. I'm very sociable. I don't go to all the lancements, but I choose ones where I want to know the artists better. I'm not very jet-set, so I prefer the human encounters." On the other hand, there are band launches – like the recent lancement at La Tulipe for Malajube's second album – where she goes "to applaud like the other fans. I like going to show my support."

Adds Pogonat: "You see a lot of people you know, and a lot you haven't seen for a long time. It's an opportunity to talk about music, art, etc." Addressing the tribal nature of these gatherings, she explains it's because Montreal's citizens are wedded to "the capacity to say that from 5 to 7:30 it's time to party. Montreal has the reputation of being a little more provocative and, say, delinquent, than other Canadian cities. So our lancements are more delinquent, too.

"Now we have more and more events, and every little event has its own soirée de lancement," says Pogonat in blasé mode. "Bands that are putting out un démo, they'll take over a little bar for a lancement. It's a pretext for la fête. To talk about yourself."

"C'est sûr!" giggles Morin-Uhl.

> **"We like to make a little happening out of an event to create a buzz sur les rues. ... We like showing off."**
> Singer Yann Perreau

The most anticipated lancement of the season was the bash two Thursdays ago for Pierre Lapointe's second album, La Forêt des mal-aimés, at the SAT (Société des Arts Technologiques) on St. Laurent's red-light strip. The darkened joint was crammed with trendies, aware that this lancement – the album has bowled over virtually all the critics – had much the same vibe as the one nearly two years ago for the album Amour Oral by indépendantiste rap trio Loco Locass. The album – and lancement – as generational talking point.

Lapointe's image on the tiny stage was screened on the walls; the event was live on radio. He felt free to use the art of media hype in a creative way, and the assembled multitude fawned at his feet in this strobe-lit Forêt, with its stuffed wild animals. This was media event as consecration. (Critic Claude André of Ici: "For the first time in my little scribbler's career: a perfect score: 10.")

For pure glamour, mixed with the family touch, people still talk about Isabelle Boulay's launch two years ago of her album Tout un jour, at the gleaming new postmodern glass and steel Caisse de dépôt edifice on Victoria Square. Its sharply angled white beams created a vertiginous atmosphere, in which Boulay walked on air, gently palming the outstretched hands before her, blowing a thousand kisses to her extended family (including fans), while her musicians played on pedestals set up throughout the large hall. Tout un jour, indeed, choreographed as a dream come true.

The warmth that seeps through these events, says alt-rock singer Yann Perreau, is "a very Latin thing. We like to welcome people, on aime le monde, we like to celebrate. We're a small market but paradoxically we buy more discs per capita than practically anyone. We like to make a little happening out of an event to create a buzz sur les rues – it's from our theatrical tradition. We like showing off for others, inviting them to share our intimacies, whether it's a lancement of a bijou or a vernissage of art or a book or disc launch. And, in turn, that makes us exchange and enter the worlds of others."

GORDON BECK THE GAZETTE
Chanteuse Amélie Veille launched her CD Un moment ma folie on Monday.

Some lancements are symbolic of Quebec's curious sociocultural position in the Americas.

Back in 1969, after Woodstock, Robert Charlebois – then dubbed "notre rockeur national" – was feted in a parade down Ste. Catherine St. to the Midway Theatre on St. Laurent Blvd. to launch a movie about his infamous aborted Paris trip the year before, where he kicked his drum kit into the stuffy audience. (Today, Charlebois's son owns the Bernard St. bistro L'Assommoir, where he has entertained the press.) In 1973, Diane Dufresne spoke extraterrestrial psychedelic joual in the Dow Planetarium, a visitor from a different cosmos. American rock critic Richard Meltzer was so impressed by the carny-grace-bombast of it all that he reviewed the album for Creem magazine.

Those were pre-Internet days when parades and public demonstrations meant something to the zeitgeist (Vive le Québec libre).

Can-do pride reflects the reality of Quebec's mongrelized pop culture in America. It's a culture that emulates lavish Hollywood in a different language and on a shoestring budget. There's a reason the top 20 most-watched shows on la télé are made-in-Quebec and local movies are box-office magic (compared with U.S.-made fare that dominates English Canada). Topped by such milestones as Céline Dion's wedding and the state funeral of Rocket Richard, life in Quebec seems like one long lancement.

Some resist the stereotype of party-hearty publicity-craving Québécois (especially if so described by an anglo). The process is much the same in Toronto and anywhere else, noted publicist Marie Christine Champagne said at this year's lancement that reopened a historic theatre, Le National on Ste. Catherine St. E.

The gang at her alternative music producers La Compagnie Larivée Cabot Champagne (also home of Les Cowboys Fringants) isn't crazy about frills. At this party, there's an old popcorn machine, maybe steamed hot dogs, to soak up the brew. They'd rather let the old venues they have purchased and restored (La Tulipe, Le National) set the atmosphere, as part of a ongoing renewal of Québécois history.

At Le National, there was Daniel Grenier, hubby of the soirée's headliner, Mara Tremblay, hoisting his kid on his shoulders, while Cowboys' drummer Dom Lebeau, in overalls, was more intent on playing with his infant than doing interviews.

Claude Larivée, the baritone-voiced alt-musique entrepreneur, noted that from the 1930s to the '50s Le National was run by Rose Ouellette, the first female theatre director in North America – also a performer known as "La Poune." Le National went through several lives since the beginning of the 20th century, from vaudeville to popular theatre,to a neighbourhood cinema, to porno, later being used for TV and film sets. As at La Tulipe a year previous, Larivée thanked "les tonnes de gars" by their first names for doing all the painting in a month. "This is a magic place where there are many ghosts ... Longue vie au National!"

On weeks where there are three times as many major lancements as days, it's important that no two lancement collide exactly, says Boisvert. The ADISQ music trade association keeps a master agenda that's rigorously inspected; if there's a clash, Boisvert will schedule an event close to a competing lancement so journalists can go easily from one to the next.

Meanwhile, publicist Alain Labonté – who's been in showbiz for five years after spending more than 20 in the restaurant trade – says lancements are "a lot like giving birth. With Isabelle Boulay's launch, it was like, 'Magnifique, quel bébé!' " He's less keen on giving birth to a lancement – with all the relatives jostling with the press – than devising the strategies behind it.

But the best-laid plans can go awry. Labonté recalls one lancement where a remote hook-up between Rad-Can interviewer François Dompierre and playwright Michel Tremblay failed: neither could hear each other on their ear buds. "That's where I turn to my little Zen side!" says Labonté. "We're only humans and machines will be machines. We did everything we could to prevent such an occurrence and it happened anyway. So there's always this stress level that's there. You've got to be positive but you feel fragile at the same time."

Labonté wears a shaved buzz cut and a ready smile, biceps bulging out of his T-shirt. He's physical in his enthusiasm, always on the go. "You need to do a lot of research for the journalists, so you need a lot of energy." He gets up at 4:30 in the morning, reads his journaux and sips his café au lait, and by 6:30 (after a thrice-weekly workout) he's ready to go until 9 or 10 at night.

It's the human touch Labonté counts on, and there's always simple psychology. "A journalist is waiting in line for an interview, just a little tap on the shoulder saying, 'It won't be long,' and the person is reassured. It's a métier where the little kindnesses and human relationships make it interesting for me."

For the next big lancement is always just around the corner. Monday there's the second disc, Poussières, from Star Académie winner Wilfrid Le Bouthillier, as well as Edgar Bori, "the singer who never shows his face," launching his album Dans ce monde Poutt Poutt. Then on Tuesday, it's the announcement of the lineup for the FrancoFolies Festival – which promises to be another long do, with plenty of booze to lubricate the crowd.

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CP FILE PHOTO
Robert Charlebois got a parade down Ste. Catherine St. before the premiere of his movie.

FROM GAZETTE FILES
Isabelle Boulay's lancement at the striking new Caisse de dépôt building was "un magnifique bébé."

FROM GAZETTE FILES
For Evelyne Morin-Uhl of Les Moquettes Coquettes, lancements can be both work and fun.

FROM GAZETTE FILES
To launch Pierre Lapointe's La Forêt des mal-aimés last week at the SAT, there was a strobe-lit forest with stuffed wild animals.

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